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Interior Finalizes Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Reforms

WASHINGTON, D.C. – As part of Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar’s ongoing agenda to change how the Department of the Interior does business, the Bureau of Land Management today finalized several reforms to its oil and gas program that will improve environmental protection of important natural resources on U.S. public lands while aiding in the orderly leasing and balanced development of the nation’s energy supply.

“We must continue to move forward quickly and responsibly on our agenda to reform the management of our nation’s onshore and offshore energy resources and our oversight of the companies that develop them,” said Secretary Salazar. “The BLM reforms we are finalizing today establish a more orderly, open, and environmentally sound process for developing oil and gas resources on public lands. The BP oil spill is a stark reminder of how we must continue to push ahead with the reforms we have been working on and which we know are needed.”

“These reforms take a fresh look – from inside the Federal government and from outside – at how we can better manage Americans’ energy resources,” said BLM Director Bob Abbey. “They will improve protections for land, water, and wildlife, and reduce potential conflicts that can lead to costly and time-consuming protests and litigation of leases. The reforms will also move control of the leasing process from Washington, DC, to the field.”

Under the [reformed oil and gas leasing policy](#), the BLM will:

- Engage the public in the development of Master Leasing Plans (MLP) prior to leasing in certain areas where significant new oil and gas development is anticipated. The intent is to fully consider other important natural resource values before making a decision on leasing and development in an area.
- Ensure potential lease sales are fully coordinated both internally and externally, including public participation, and interdisciplinary review of available information, as well as on-site visits to parcels prior to leasing when necessary to supplement or validate existing data.

- Require an “extraordinary circumstances” review screen before applying the categorical exclusions in the Energy Policy Act of 2005 to oil and gas drilling activities on BLM lands. Categorical exclusions are categories of actions that do not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and for which the BLM is generally not required to prepare extensive environmental reviews. A review for extraordinary circumstances has been required for all administratively-established categorical exclusions, and will now apply to oil and gas categorical exclusions established by the Energy Policy Act of 2005, as well.

In January, Secretary Salazar [outlined the reforms](#) that BLM is finalizing today. Many of the reforms follow the recommendations of an [interdisciplinary review team](#) that studied a controversial 2008 oil and gas lease sale in Utah.

Abbey said the increased opportunity for public participation and a more thorough environmental review process and documentation can help reduce the number of protests filed, as well as enhance the BLM’s ability to resolve protests prior to lease sales.

“The consequence of not following this front-loaded process in the past has been significant protests and appeals, coupled with judicial restraints on development, job loss, and diminished access to energy resources,” said Abbey. “Instead of the BLM investing vast amounts of staff time and attention to defending lawsuits and revisiting the leasing process after receiving direction from the courts, our goal is to undertake important reviews in advance.”

The BLM manages 253 million acres – more land than any other Federal agency. This land, known as the National System of Public Lands, is primarily located in 12 Western states, including Alaska. The BLM, with a budget of about \$1 billion, also administers 700 million acres of sub-surface mineral estate throughout the nation. The BLM's multiple-use mission is to sustain the health and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The BLM accomplishes this by managing such activities as outdoor recreation, livestock grazing, mineral development, and energy production, and by conserving natural, historical, cultural, and other resources on public lands.

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